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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001033

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: JVP DIGGING IN HEELS OVER JOINT
MECHANISM

REF: A. COLOMBO 1027

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1019

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a June 8 conversation with poloffs, Somawansa Amarasinghe, Leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), confirmed his party's determination to quit the United People's Front Alliance (UPFA) if President Chandrika Kumaratunga proceeds with plans to sign a so-called "joint mechanism" on tsunami relief with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Since elections would be "disastrous" for the country, Amarasinghe said, the JVP would join the opposition but would continue to support the government from the outside on "people-friendly" issues. If early elections were called, however, he was confident that his party would fare better than in 2004 and could be back in government as a partner in another alliance. Citing a lack of support for the mechanism within the President's own party, however, Amarasinghe predicted that Kumaratunga would not sign the agreement with the Tigers. The JVP clearly sees the confrontation over the joint mechanism as a way to demonstrate its leadership--and divert attention from the President's own attempts to demonstrate leadership. End summary.

NO JOINT MECHANISM BEFORE NEGOTIATIONS

[1](#)2. (C) On June 8 poloffs met with Somawansa Amarasinghe, Leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) partner in the United People's Front Alliance (UPFA), and Nandana Gunatilleke, JVP MP from Kalutara District (and UPFA Chairman) to discuss JVP threats to leave the government if President Chandrika Kumaratunga signs the so-called "joint mechanism" agreement on tsunami relief with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Amarasinghe, noting bitterly that no one in his party--including Cabinet Ministers--has even seen the draft text, said that the President had briefed his party on the salient points of the agreement on May 27. The JVP opposes the mechanism, he said, because it puts a terrorist organization on the same plane as a democratically elected government. The agreement would be perceived as rewarding the LTTE with undeserved legitimacy, he continued, when the Tigers had done nothing to change their terrorist tactics, renounce violence or cease child recruitment. "We do not expect them to disarm tomorrow," but they violate the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) blatantly and continuously, he charged. Before engaging with the Tigers, "we have to see some evidence of improved behavior and willingness to enter the democratic process," he insisted.

[1](#)3. (C) The UPFA manifesto authorizes the President to undertake peace negotiations--not to sign an agreement on a joint mechanism, Amarasinghe continued. "We've been elected to implement the manifesto; anything that creeps in afterward will not be tolerated." Poloff noted that both sides seemed to have reached an impasse over preconditions for negotiations; could the joint mechanism not provide an avenue to re-engage with the Tigers without preconditions? No, said Amarasinghe. The Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) is prepared to re-enter negotiations without preconditions with the Tigers at any time, he added; the only thing preventing resumed negotiations is the Tigers' own inflexibility. "The joint mechanism cannot be a stepping stone to dialogue," he asserted; "this cannot be the beginning." Acknowledging U.S. concerns about Tiger ceasefire violations, poloff asked if humanitarian concern for the welfare of innocent tsunami victims in the north and east were not enough reason to consider the mechanism. No, Amarasinghe responded, adding "We don't separate politics and humanitarian work." He then expressed appreciation for the firm U.S. stance on terror, asserting that the JVP, like President Bush, says yes to democracy and no to terror. He said his party was grateful that the USG, unlike the GSL, had maintained the LTTE's

listing as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

14. (C) Even if his party were not absolutely opposed to the joint mechanism as a matter of principle, there are numerous other problems as well with the assumptions underpinning the mechanism, Amarasinghe said, and began to tick them off. First, the LTTE controls only 49 of the over 350 grama sevakas (the smallest unit of local administration--usually a cluster of villages) in the north and east; why is it given equal status with the GSL in deciding how tsunami aid in that area will be implemented? Giving the Tigers such a prominent role in decisions affecting areas not under their control only reinforces the idea of a Tamil homeland of which the Tigers are the sole representative, he complained. Second, the overwhelming number of tsunami victims in the north and east are Muslim; why are Tigers given a greater role--and more representatives--in the mechanism? Third, the mechanism is not actually needed to distribute tsunami assistance. Tsunami aid is already reaching affected populations,

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including in LTTE-controlled areas, without the mechanism, he asserted. If that were not the case, he concluded, there would have been food riots in the welfare camps.

LTTE UNPOPULAR IN EAST?

15. (C) Although the Tigers continue to claim the north and east as a traditional Tamil homeland, the LTTE is not popular in the east, Amarasinghe said; Tamil people there support the dissident "Karuna" group. If the ceasefire broke and full-scale hostilities were to resume, he predicted, eastern Tamils would come out in force in favor of Karuna. He added that the JVP had been trying to organize better and create linkages with civil society in the east, but those efforts had been interrupted by the tsunami. The party plans to resume those activities soon, he reported.

THE FIRST ALLIANCE, BUT NOT THE LAST

16. (C) The President has not met the JVP on the joint mechanism since May 27, and no meetings on this controversial issue have been scheduled since, Gunatilleke said. When asked what the JVP would do if the President were to sign the mechanism agreement, Amarasinghe rejoined that his party would leave the alliance and sit with the opposition in Parliament. He confirmed that the JVP might still support the President on "people-friendly" issues that are consistent with the UPFA manifesto. The party is not hoping for early elections, he said; elections now would be "disastrous" for the country. If elections were held, however, the JVP would fare better than in the 2004 polls, he predicted, adding that the party now has three times the number of district delegates that it had in 2003. "I can't say that means we would do three times as well" as last time, he conceded, but he expects the party's village-level organizational prowess would translate into an even stronger showing at the polls. When asked if the other two large parties were undertaking similar initiatives to improve their visibility and popularity at the local level, Amarasinghe responded, "We don't see them" in the villages. If elections were called, "we can be in an alliance with anyone," Amarasinghe said, including, he indicated, the opposition United National Party. The UPFA is "our first alliance, but not our last"; the JVP is learning and growing all the time.

SHOWDOWN OVER MECHANISM:
TEST OF JVP LEADERSHIP

17. (C) "Crises are good for us" as a party and as a country, Amarasinghe said, because crises produce leaders. As a party, "we are demonstrating our leadership" through our principled stand on the joint mechanism, he stated. That said, despite all the to-and-fro in the press and the President's much-repeated determination to sign the mechanism, "she will not do it," Amarasinghe predicted. In the end, she will have to back down because most of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) MPs do not support it, he said, asserting that she can count no more than 20 SLFP MPs in her camp. (Note: We had heard the previous day from an SLFP source that a number of SLFP MPs had refused to meet the President on the joint mechanism. We have been unable to confirm that story, but it makes sense that at least some MPs would oppose it--not necessarily on principle but out of fear of the government falling and having to contest elections. Also in the rumor department, June 9 newspapers carried reports that the GSL had contacted the Election Commission about the prospect of holding early elections. Assistant Commissioner of Elections Rasika Pieris denied that report to us.)

18. (SBU) Other Sinhalese nationalist parties have also seized upon opposition to the joint mechanism as a way to demonstrate the strength of their convictions. Ven. Omalpe Sobitha Thero, a Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) Buddhist monk MP, is now on the fourth day of his hunger strike, begun on June 6 at the sacred Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, to protest the joint mechanism (Ref B). The monk, who has only one kidney, is reportedly extremely frail and spurned an appeal from Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who visited him in Kandy on June 8, to talk to the President about the issue.

COMMENT

19. (C) Amarasinghe, who underwent heart surgery in the UK in February, seemed much more tired, far more subdued and considerably less confident than we have ever seen him. It is clear to us that the stress of his party's eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with the President is beginning to show. The question remains: who will blink first? The disagreement between the President and her alliance partner over this issue has received so much publicity and become so vitriolic--with the President accusing the JVP of killing her husband and hinting broadly that her own life may be at risk on one side and the JVP accusing her of selling out the country and the Sinhala people on the other--that there seems little hope of finding common ground for compromise. Worse still, the JVP seems to have decided to make the joint mechanism the litmus test for Sinhalese nationalism and to showcase, through its unwavering, if ill-founded, opposition to dealing with the Tigers that it is better equipped to safeguard national interests than the President. Although the JVP has threatened to leave the government countless times before, it appears that this time the former insurgents may mean it.
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